



Building a teacher professional growth system

THE (NOT SO FAST OR STRAIGHT) LINE TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Robla SD is on a journey to innovate an educator evaluation system that embraces accountability and continuous improvement, redefining how instructional leaders think about professional growth and how they support that growth.

Resourcing Excellence in Education (REEd), an educational intermediary housed in the UC Davis School of Education, approached Robla School District in 2015 with a request to participate in a federal Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant to help demonstrate that teacher evaluation could be used to empower teachers and help them grow professionally.

Superintendent Ruben Reyes took the request to his teachers union and administrative team and both parties agreed to serve as a pilot district. Among the appealing parts of the request was the opportunity to build a “home-grown” model, as that is how this K-6 northern Sacramento urban district likes to operate. Robla serves approximately 2,500 students, 43 percent of whom are English learners and 92 percent are designated for free or reduce-priced meals.

Now, three years later, Robla is fully committed to the creation of a formal practitioner review process that is moving the district closer to its emerging vision of educator effectiveness.

By way of background, the Stull Act, originally passed in 1971, is the major California state legislation governing teacher

evaluation. For good or bad – depending on one’s perspective – that law has remained essentially unchanged, as have the evaluation systems put into place by individual districts in response.

The 2002 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as No Child Left Behind, with its strong focus on accountability, contributed to a nationwide interest in re-thinking what it means to be an effective teacher and the value of evaluation in teacher improvement efforts.

California’s engagement in the renewed conversations contributed to the development of the California Teachers Association Teacher Evaluation Framework (2012) and introduced language to amend the 1971 Education Code in Senate Bill 499 introduced in 2015. Ultimately, the EdCode was not amended and the state elected to continue its pursuit of a policy path driven by local-control.

The ITQ grant funding the work in Robla rolled out through the California Depart-

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ment of Education and it too can be linked back to the accountability conversation, but with a twist. Rather than mandating tighter controls, the grant offered pilot sites the opportunity to join a small but growing number of districts interested in pursuing the challenging task of developing a continuous improvement system that supports effective teaching and the professional growth of teachers.

Without question, there is room for improvement in California's current system. For example, Robla's system has been two-fold. There is an informal process during which principals work with individual teachers to set specific goals and then conduct classroom observations looking for evidence of those goals. The second, formal process, involves two 45-minute observations with a final summary that goes in teachers' files.

The superintendent estimates that 95 percent of teachers receive the highest ratings in those formal evaluations. That may sound like a good thing, but while Robla has great teachers, it isn't because all of them consistently excel. We know that the ratings are sometimes inflated because principals don't want to put negative feedback into teachers' files. Nor do they want to come across as overly critical with beginning teachers.

We know that because of the "honest" feedback that came through informal discussions with principals about their teachers and through the superintendent's own observations of teaching practices. The practice of high scoring is problematic and makes it clear that the commitment and skill set of principals varies.

Relevant research and policy initiatives across the country over the past 20-plus years hint at other challenges, including the technical complexity (e.g., limitations of measures, calibration), along with the social, economic and political implications, including equitable distribution of teachers, contract negotiations, performance-based compensation, locally controlled funding and value-added measures that factor into the thinking and actions behind the effectiveness movement.

It is easy to get "lost" in the complexity, to focus on mitigating the challenges, and

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to lose track of the reason for actually having an educator effectiveness movement, which is essentially to find ways to improve the education of all students by supporting the professional growth and development of educators.

Drivers of improvement

When REEd reached out to Robla it was not with the goal of helping it to overcome challenges or to ignore the complexity of the task, but rather to encourage it to place a strong emphasis on something every school district in California can control – its own approach to building and sustaining a professional growth system.

We made it clear that we could not offer a quick fix. Instead, we said we want to help the district think about a teacher effectiveness system and that it will require redefining how instructional leaders think about the professional growth of teachers and how the district supports that growth.

Fortunately, Superintendent Reyes is an instructional leader whose position is that when it comes to providing helpful feedback to teachers, Robla has made some progress – but it's never enough. As he says, "This isn't about just about putting a new evaluation system in place. This is about helping us to define instructional leadership and our vision for the overall culture of the district."

Through the ITQ grant, REEd is providing Robla with a process and model to engage in conversations with teachers and principals about how to be partners in supporting effective practices. Our model builds on three premises, all of which are intended to help educators to "think big, but

start small." These premises include:

- A flexible, facilitated continuous improvement process needs to exist and that it is through this process that any school district, regardless of context and entry point, can build and subsequently improve their system.

- Our singular aim is to engage districts in identifying, generating and putting into use the full spectrum of resources that are needed to support the professional growth of educators. This builds on the work of researchers like Ann Jaquith at Stanford (2015).

- This work requires the long-term investment of a learning community operating under the assumption that it will face setbacks and pitfalls.

We've identified what we believe to be the four key drivers necessary for supporting the professional growth of teachers:

- Articulate a set of essential teaching practices, and associated instructional moves, to drive professional growth.

- Build human and decisional capital through a collective professional learning approach.

- Create conditions for ongoing professional dialogue about instruction and improvement.

- Foster a professional culture that cultivates local teacher community in driving instructional changes.

We aren't suggesting that the presence of these four conditions will guarantee success, only, as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching states in its improvement science work around drivers of change, if this set of conditions is improved it has the



potential to move an organization closer to its aim of supporting professional growth.

This may seem like a simplistic approach but our own experience, coupled with observations of current district practices across California indicate it is not. This is why we keep going back to our three premises and setting the expectation that a capacity-building, continuous improvement framework be integrated into the district model as a conceptual and analytic lens.

When you start to unpack any of these four conditions you realize that taking on even one of them is a tremendous task. During the first year of the grant, Robla's core team of three teachers, one principal, the HR director, and the superintendent spent a day facilitated by REEd, envisioning what a system that puts professional growth at the center might look like. From there, we spent three days over the summer working with Robla and three other pilot districts during which they were asked to develop a six-month action plan.

Essential teaching practices

As Robla's core team began to map out their action plan they also began to grapple with the selection of a shared set of targeted, high-impact instructional practices to drive professional growth. A typical, and reasonable, response on our part would have been to suggest that they turn to an existing resource, the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP, 1997), which provides "a common language and a vision of the scope and complexity of teaching that enable teachers to define and develop their practice" (p. 1). But, as we had discovered in working with other pilot sites, while useful, the CSTP standards do not actually delineate which instructional practices are most essential and highest leverage for supporting the California Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Nor were they ever intended to help assess shifts in instructional practices.

Recognizing the dilemma, we introduced Robla to an alternative resource, a set of targeted, high leverage, instructional practices that emerged from eight years of research (O'Hara and Pritchard, 2016). We believed that the SOAR® Teaching Frames could provide a much needed nexus between the

CCSS and CSTP; help teachers and administrators drive student learning by focusing on a set of effective, integrated instructional practices for CCSS English language arts and anchor literacy standards; and scaffold professional learning opportunities for teachers in different grade spans and across content areas. Most importantly, we believed that the teaching frames had the potential to become the basis of a calibration platform because they are articulated at the right level or "grain size" that allows one to measure growth.

SOAR resonated with the core team but they knew they wouldn't get far if they simply announced that they had selected it for district use. This is why we say that you need to attend to all of the four drivers. You won't be successful in meeting one condition without attending to the other three.

Adopting a new instructional vision won't happen unless there is also a professional learning culture that promotes ongoing collaboration and feedback. That means that you need to be very mindful of the need to give people information, and recognize that communication is the foundation for building a culture of learning.

That academic year, the core team spent the majority of their time rolling out a communication plan that introduced the district to SOAR. It involved some brave conversations about the current culture and facing up to the reality that not all district practices were conducive to professional growth. They had to acknowledge that there was some mistrust of the current system, and talk about how some teachers have been wronged in the evaluation process in ways that haven't served them to grow.

For example, the administrator who completely missed the opportunity to engage in a meaningful conversation with a teacher about her professional practice by leaving the evaluation form, along with a post-it that said, "Please sign this and get it back to me," in her mailbox.

In year two of the grant Robla's focus was almost entirely on establishing the SOAR Teaching Frames as the foundational piece of a professional growth system. In a well-thought out strategic move, the core team first identified and worked with a sub-set

of early adopters – the HIPsters (high impact practices), who participated in ongoing professional learning specific to SOAR, and who eventually helped to select disciplinary discussion as their focal point.

During that year, the superintendent negotiated with the teachers union for district-wide PD days to be used to train all teachers, a move which set expectations for the adoption of a shared vision of instructional practice, and which provided the opportunity to deepen everyone's understanding of the resource. Also of import, the core team identified a need for, and negotiated, the creation of several new positions, including professional growth facilitators and Professional Learning Support Teachers (PLSTs).

Conditions for support

Collectively, these actions helped Robla to establish the set of conditions that we believe to be necessary for building a professional growth system. This year, year three of the grant, will be a major test of how successful our collective efforts have been, as 15 teachers have agreed to pilot the emerging formal teacher review process. That may seem like a long-time coming. At one point we were asked if we'd ever get around to actually talking about "evaluation," but change is a recursive process that draws on existing resources and leads to the generation of new resources.

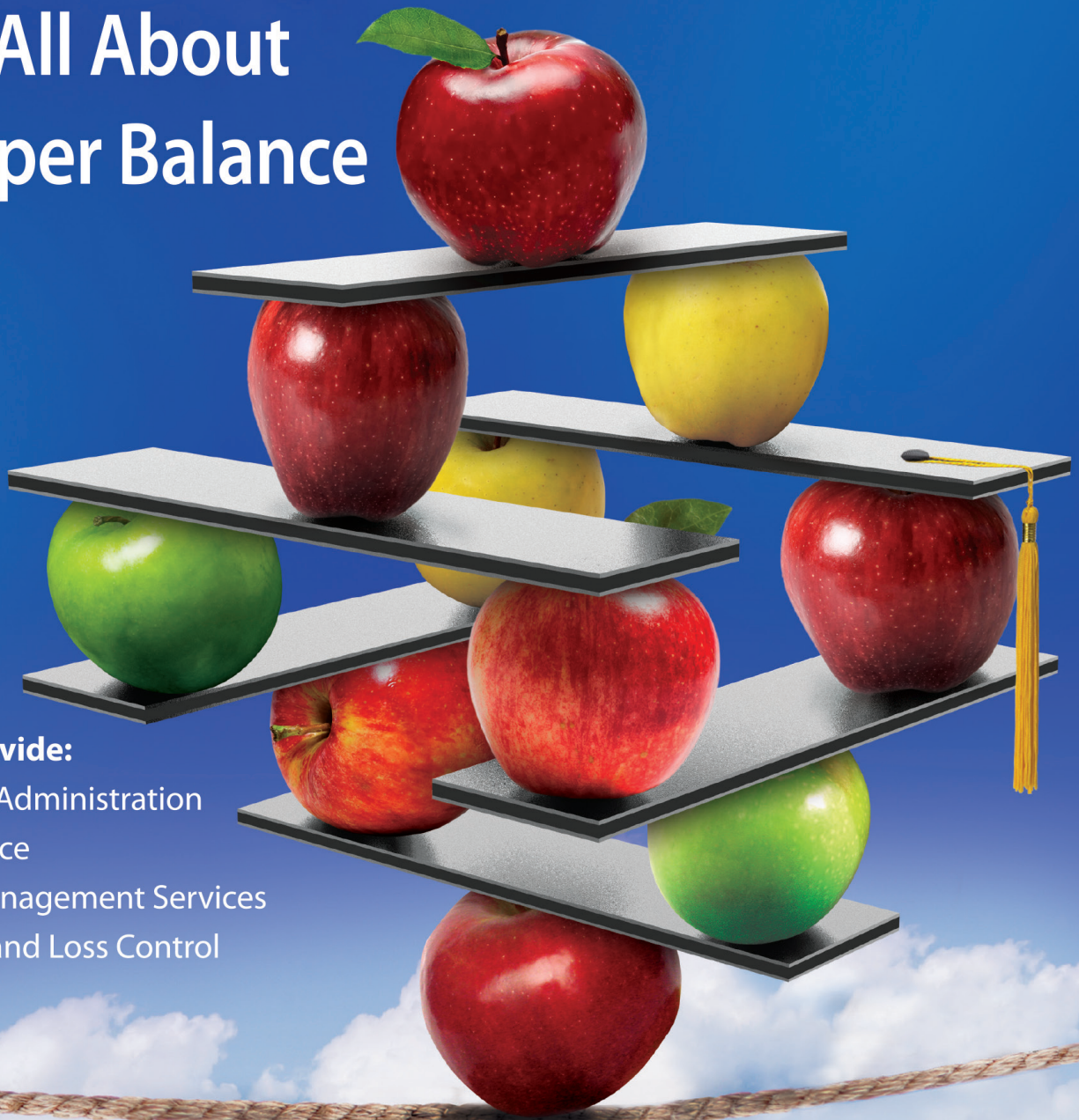
Robla could not have selected a classroom observation tool without first defining effective instructional practices and adopting the SOAR Teaching Frames. Nor could the district have known, in the identification of new positions, that it was laying the foundation for a teacher leader pathway.

Superintendent Reyes will know if the grant has been successful if he has managed to get out the message that every educator in the district has value and they also have something they should work on. As he says, "If we want teachers to shift their practice, then principals are going to have to shift their current role as a person who is looking at teachers and judging them.

"Principals need to be seen as partners in helping teachers grow as professionals. And, I need to shift the way I think as well, as a supervisor of principals' work. I need to ensure

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This is about helping us to define instructional leadership and our vision for the overall culture of the district.

that my teachers understand and use specific instructional practices, and that principals are informed to the point where they can delve into these effective practices as well.

“If principals are going to spend their time in deep conversations with teachers around instruction, I need to be ready to say here is a task or responsibility you can let go of in order to be able to take this on. We also have to have a plan for who will take on that which was formerly the principal’s responsibility.”

A realization for the core team has been that there are some things – sticky issues – they aren’t ready to take on, including the role of student achievement in the growth system and what they will do to support very experienced, as well as struggling teachers. But, for now, they are comfortable knowing that they are laying the foundation, in terms of communication and expectations.

“It’s not so overwhelming if you are actually taking little steps that you can manage,” Reyes said. “We just have to work on this first step, and look as far ahead as the next step. Creating a new vision isn’t a huge insurmountable problem. It’s something we are all capable of.”

REEd has learned as well. Working with Robla has forced us to think about what it means to engage in a cycle of continuous improvement. We’ve come to acknowledge our own value as a university intermediary who has the ability to say, “You know the big goal, and you know there are a lot of steps that have to take place between now and that goal. It’s OK to slow down. It’s OK to pause and think about what you need to adjust. It’s OK to end up going in an entirely different direction than the one you had originally anticipated.”

This is challenging work for any district. It takes time, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. But the potential pay-off is moving California toward a statewide, system-wide professional learning model that values teacher choice and voice; strong leadership within a growth-driven environment and mindset; ongoing collaborative opportunities; the productive and meaningful use of time; and ongoing, formative reflective process that maximizes the potential for instructional improvement and student learning.

Resources

- Carnegie Foundation for the Advance-

ment of Teaching (2013). “Improvement Research Carried Out Through Networked Communities: Accelerating Learning about Practices that Support More Productive Student Mindsets.” Available at www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications.

- California Teachers Association (2012). Teacher Evaluation Framework.

- Commission on Teacher Credentialing (1997). The California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP).

- Jaquith, Ann. (2015). “Site-Based Leadership for Improving Instruction.” The Educational Forum, 2015, Vol. 79, No. 1, 12-23. Published online: 08 Jan 2015.

- O’Hara, S. and Pritchard, R. (2016). “Framing Teaching for Common Core literacy standards: SOAR teaching frames for literacy.” Psychology Research, February 2016, Vol. 6, No. 2, 92-101.

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